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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS RESULTS SPELL DIVIDED KARBALA COUNCIL

BAGHDAD 00000315 001.5 OF 002

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

¶1. (C) Summary: The results of the provincial elections in Karbala reveal a fractured electorate and presage a divided Provincial Council (PC). Only Yusef Majid al-Haboubi and his one-man "list" received double-digit support. The other 26 seats likely will be divided among candidates representing the anti-Da'wa "Hope of the Two Rivers" list, the Da'wa-backed "State Law Coalition" list, the Sadrist "Independent Free People's Trend" list, and the "Martyr of the Imam Ali Shrine" list supported by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). In a sign of anti-incumbent fervor, Karbala, the only province with a sitting Da'wa governor, is the only Shi'a-majority province in which the Prime Minister's slate did not win the most votes. Paragraph 6 contains biographic information on al-Haboubi. End summary.

Who's on First

¶2. (C) With better than 90 percent of the ballots counted, longtime Karbala political fixture Yusef Majid al-Haboubi has emerged as the clear winner in the provincial elections. Running as the sole candidate on his eponymous "list," al-Haboubi garnered 13.8 percent of the vote. Second, with 8.8 percent, was the "Hope of the Two Rivers" list led by disaffected Da'wa members -- and brothers -- Mohammad Hamid and Abbas Hamid al-Musawi. They broke with mainline Da'wa over the ultimately successful campaign by Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khazali (supported by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki) to transfer provincial Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) commander MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat al-Hasnawi out of the province last September. Ra'ad's right-hand man was Maj Ali Hamid al-Musawi, brother of Mohammad and Abbas. After his ouster, Ra'ad flirted publicly with ISCI and -- according to well-placed government contacts here -- the "Hope of the Two Rivers" list received financial support from ISCI.

¶3. (C) Also prominent within "Hope of the Two Rivers" is Bushra Hassan Ashour, second deputy chairperson of the current PC. Well known for her Fadhilah sympathies, her apparent decision to accept ISCI money rather than to run on the Fadhilah Party list proved prescient; the latter's poor showing likely means it will have no representation in the new Council. In third place, with 8.5 percent, was the Da'wa-backed "State Law Coalition" featuring Aqeel and current Director General for Agriculture Amal al-Din al-Hir. Wealthy and ambitious, al-Hir has been mentioned by former governor and current United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq representative in Karbala Ali al-Kamonah as a strong candidate to become the next governor. Fourth place went to the "Independent Free People's Trend" list supported by Muqtada al-Sadr. It received 6.8 percent of the vote. The primary ISCI list, "Martyr of the Imam Ali Shrine," took fifth with 6.4 percent of the vote.

14. (C) Officials at the Independent High Electoral Commission have announced that slightly more than 57 percent of Karbala's 540,000 eligible voters -- or 310,000 persons -- voted in the provincial elections, with 11,500 votes required to win a seat. Thus, new PC members will be drawn from only the top five lists, those obtaining 3.7 percent or more of the vote. The sixth-place list, "Justice and Reform," finished just out of the money with 3.6 percent.

15. (C) Our contacts' early interpretations of the results suggest that al-Haboubi's triumph reflects a reaction by Karbalans to the failure of the religious parties -- Da'wa and ISCI -- to fulfill their promises. The success of "Hope of the Two Rivers" is chalked up to the ISF's continued loyalty to Ra'ad, who continues to harbor ambitions here. The youth vote is credited with producing the strong showing achieved by the Sadrists, while ISCI is considered to have bought its fifth-place finish.

Bio Notes

16. (C) Yusef Majid Hadi al-Haboubi was born in 1947 in Najaf. His family moved to Karbala when he was a child. Likely a former Ba'ath Party member, he served in various provincial leadership positions during 1990-2003, including as mayor of Ayn al-Tamr Qadah (western Karbala Province), mayor of Karbala City, and deputy governor (2001-02). He was acting governor for several weeks in 2003. He did not stand for election in 2005, but has served as a paid consultant to the current provincial government. Widely credited with shielding Karbala from the worst of Saddam Husayn's

BAGHDAD 00000315 002.2 OF 002

predations, al-Haboubi -- a Shi'a -- is regarded by many here as humble, decent and devout. Nevertheless, gossip abounds that his candidacy was supported by the al-Awdah ("Return") party that represents the reconstituted Ba'ath Party. According to a variety of contacts, al-Haboubi's campaign was the source of a rumor that circulated in January, 2009, that he had been hospitalized as a result of an assassination attempt perpetrated either by Da'wa or ISCI. The same contacts claim he thereby was the beneficiary of an enormous sympathy vote.

Comment

17. (C) The failure of any list but al-Haboubi's to win more than 10 percent of the vote reveals a fractured electorate and presages a divided Council. We suspect that Karbalans were unfamiliar with the lists and what they stood for, with the campaign season's brevity exacerbating the muddle. Al-Haboubi aside, the fact that relatively few here flocked to the familiar -- Da'wa and ISCI -- suggests independents might have done better had they been able to get their messages across. The surprisingly strong showing by Sadrists portends stormy seas ahead for the PC, a vessel that has earned a poor reputation for navigational efficacy. End Comment.
CROCKER